

## Many Danes, Some Norwegians: Karen Miller's Diary, 1894

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 1998 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

---

### Recommended Citation

"Many Danes, Some Norwegians: Karen Miller's Diary, 1894." *The Annals of Iowa* 57 (1998), 192-193.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.10175>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

at Dana College. The correspondence that is made available in this volume focuses primarily on an exchange between Johanne Nielsen (Tante Johanne) and her nephew, Christian Mengers, and dates from 1887, the year of his immigration to America.

Johanne Nielsen, her husband, and their three young daughters emigrated from Denmark in the early 1870s. In the mid-1880s, the Nielsens, by then a family of eleven, relocated from Streator, Illinois, to a farm near Algona, Iowa. Johanne's loneliness in America, her longing for a Danish community of worship, and her sense of spiritual isolation find natural expression in her letters to her nephew, who was a Danish Lutheran minister in the United States. Interwoven with this primary exchange, and very much a part of this immigrant family's ongoing communication, are letters from Johanne's daughters and from Christian's father and brothers. Their voices add range and depth to the volume.

The editorial commentaries that preface each letter firmly situate the exchanges within their larger historical context. The Iowa farm and the town of Algona figure as muted background in Johanne's letters. Her older daughters taught in rural schools. Their training and experiences contribute some of the more vivid "lived" moments to the correspondence.

Johanne Nielsen never really adjusted to her life in America. Those involved in immigration studies will find this book of particular interest.

*Many Danes, Some Norwegians: Karen Miller's Diary, 1894*, edited by John W. Nielsen, translated by Ninna Engskow. Blair, NE: Lur Publications, Danish Immigrant Archive, 1996. xviii, 173 pp. Illustrations, index. \$14.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY KRISTIN ELMQUIST, SWISHER, IOWA

For reasons unknown, Karen Miller, a Danish immigrant farm woman, kept a diary in 1894, the year before her death at age 55. In it she describes in tremendous detail farm life in Elko, Minnesota. The editor introduces each month with an informative, contextualizing comment. The text contains both the original Danish and the English translation, capturing the particular language of this immigrant community. Mingled with news of the farm and her family are religious sentiments and hymns. Miller comments on the primary events in her life—the activities she and her family did that day, the

weather and its effect on the household and farm, news of her children and the other immigrant families in the area.

*Many Danes, Some Norwegians* is not only a fascinating glimpse into the daily activities, thoughts, and feelings of an ordinary woman; it also lends depth and personality to larger themes in immigrant, regional, and women's histories with which we are more familiar. In Miller's words, we hear how religious faith helped those of her era approach and construct their new lives in America. For Miller, being surrounded by other Danes was not just of practical benefit, but also buoyed her emotionally and spiritually, as did the Danish-language church. Through her record, we witness the rhythms of farm life in this era, and how they were shaped by seasons, by visits from friends and family, and by illness. This simple diary is a treasure both for scholars and for descendants of Scandinavian immigrants throughout the Midwest; it lets us know an immigrant woman, giving meaning to other, more distant histories.

*Kate M. Cleary: A Literary Biography with Selected Works*, by Susanne K. George. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997. xiii, 250 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$30.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY BERNICE E. GALLAGHER, LAKE FOREST COLLEGE

Kate McPhelim Cleary (1863–1905) developed her creative talents and produced a voluminous and significant body of literary work despite staggering personal, physical, and social obstacles. Born to Irish immigrant parents in New Brunswick, Canada, Cleary wrote and published throughout her poverty-stricken youth in Chicago and then continued her successful literary efforts after she married and moved to a prairie home in Hubbell, Nebraska. Cleary's work was regularly featured in midwestern newspapers and national magazines, praised by readers and critics alike, and provided money that was desperately needed for her family's survival. Around the time of Cleary's death, Houghton Mifflin was preparing to publish a collection of her short stories that her editor said "showed many aspects of western life better than any stories I have seen" (101). Cleary's strongest contribution to American literature would lie in such stories and sketches—realistic tales about lives, customs, personal and social concerns of prairie folk, gentle satires about social pretensions and the universal battles between the sexes, and inspirational prose defending the simple midwestern values of sincerity and self-reliance. What seems truly exceptional, however, is that

Copyright of *Annals of Iowa* is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.